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SUBJECT: HANOI ARCHBISHOP NOTES PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS FOR VIETNAM'S CATHOLICS

Ref: A) Vatican 0025; B) 06 Hanoi 3058; C) Hanoi 100;
D) 06 Hanoi 2511

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Summary

11. (SBU) On January 29, Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet told the Ambassador that conditions for Catholics in northern Vietnam are steadily improving. Christmas 2006 was festive, and the Church was able to send priests to celebrate Christmas in one previously problematic northern province. That said, the Church still faces some GVN prejudice and continued engagement by the international community with the GVN is needed to ensure further progress. The training of priests is now adequate. The Archdiocese plans to develop more charitable programs in the north including an HIV/AIDS treatment center in Hanoi. Catholic-Protestant relations are improving following President Bush's participation in the first ever ecumenical service in Vietnam during APEC 2006. End Summary.

The Archbishop comes to Lunch

12. (SBU) On January 29, the Ambassador hosted a lunch with Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet and Father Dang Duc Ngan, Vicar General of the Hanoi Archdiocese. This was the first time Kiet or any representative of the Hanoi Archdiocese has been willing to meet privately with us at the Ambassador's Residence, despite our long-standing invitation. In addition to the Prime Minister's January 25 call on Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican (Ref A and septel), Kiet discussed conditions for the Church over Christmas 2006, continuing problems, Kiet's plans to develop more charitable programs in the north including an HIV/AIDS hospice in Hanoi, the Church's interaction with Catholics in other countries and Catholic-Protestant relations following the President's participation in the first ever ecumenical service in Vietnam during APEC 2006.

Christmas 2006 Saw Improvements

13. (SBU) Kiet stated that Christmas 2006 in Hanoi was very festive, with many decorations on shops and houses -- proof that Christmas has become a social event and a Vietnamese festival (Ref B). Outside of Hanoi, conditions for Christmas celebrations were also somewhat improved (Ref C). For example, previously problematic Ha Giang Province allowed two priests from Cao Bang Province to travel to Ha Giang Town to celebrate Mass with the province's Catholics. Hoa Binh Province, on the other hand, continued to refuse permission for the Church to assign priests from Hung Hoa Diocese to minister to Catholics at Christmas outside of two districts which already

have assigned priests.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that Cua Bac, the Catholic Church that hosted the ecumenical service for President Bush on November 19, 2006, and the main church for expat Catholics in Hanoi, was not allowed to have a special Christmas Day or Christmas Eve service. (Note: Emboffs report that the priest told the congregation they could not have a special service "because the community must only meet at 10 a.m. on Sundays," though carols would be sung on December 31. On that day, however, the priest announced Christmas carols could not be sung "for technical reasons." End Note.) Kiet expressed surprise at this information because he had assumed that there was a midnight mass at all of the churches under his responsibility on Christmas day. He asked Father Ngan to investigate the report.

Catholics still facing prejudice...

¶5. (SBU) Despite the relative success of Christmas 2006, Kiet observed that there is still considerable prejudice within the GVN against religion in general. Some GVN officials still think religion is not good for the country. Progress on religious freedom to date has been due mainly to outside pressure on Hanoi, such as that brought by the USG. It is important to note, however, that President Nguyen Minh Triet and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung are both open-minded about religion, Kiet added. For example, during Triet's first meeting as President with the Catholic Church's Episcopal Council of Bishops in September 2006, he "listened attentively" to the problems of the Church and expressed surprise and concern about conditions for Catholics in the remote border provinces of Son La and Lai Chau (Ref D).

¶6. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that President Triet's upcoming visit to the United States later this year provides a good opportunity to further engage the GVN on religious freedom. Kiet agreed to coordinate with us after the mid-February Tet holidays on

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identifying specific problems facing the Church that could be addressed in this context. During the September 2006 meeting mentioned above, Triet acknowledged Catholics' problems, but made no concrete promises to assist the Church, he added. For their part, the Catholics had pressed mainly for permission to develop medical and other charitable services (see below).

...but Training Enough Priests

¶7. (SBU) In response to the Ambassador's question about whether the Church is still suffering from a lack of trained priests, Kiet said that the past lack of adequate numbers of priests and nuns is not really a problem any more, although there is still a need for more priests in the north. The GVN permission to hold annual seminary classes and its decision to allow the Church to build a new southern seminary (in Son Loc) and a new northern seminary (TBD) will solve the staffing problems that remain. Also, the GVN has permitted the Church to convene special classes for "unrecognized priests" in Nam Dinh and Nha Trang provinces as a compromise to allow priests who had been secretly ordained by the Church in the past to be officially recognized as priests. For example, a Nam Dinh priest who was "secretly ordained" in Boston some time ago will be officially ordained after completing the one-year course.

Kiet Contemplating a Hanoi HIV/AIDS Center

¶8. (SBU) Turning to Catholic charitable work, Kiet stated that the Hanoi Archdiocese is exploring the establishment of an HIV/AIDS center in one of the parishes in or near Hanoi. This center would focus first on providing training to nurses and other medical professionals who treat people living with HIV/AIDS. The eventual goal is for the center to provide direct clinical care to HIV/AIDS patients, although it is not envisioned that the center would become a hospital. The Archdiocese has already discussed its preliminary idea with the Vietnam Fatherland Front (the Party's umbrella

organization for various groups in society), but has still not broached the subject with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLISA), which must also give permission for such an endeavor.

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador offered to share the experience of the Embassy's PEPFAR team to assist the Archdiocese in setting up the center. At a later date, Embassy staff could also provide guidance on putting together a project proposal to tap into USG funding. Kiet replied that his staff has already discussed the project with the international NGO (and long-time USAID partner) Catholic Relief Services (CRS). He promised to sit down with Embassy and CRS staff to work out a suitable program after the Archdiocese meets with MOLISA.

Relations with Catholics in Other Countries Deepening

¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador asked if Vietnam's Catholics have been able to interact freely with Catholics in other countries. Kiet stated that the Vietnam Church has burgeoning relationships with Catholics in Europe and the United States. The French Church's Episcopal Council has sent two delegations to Vietnam in recent years, one just before Christmas 2006. In addition, the U.S. Church's Episcopal Council is planning to send a delegation to Hanoi in late February. To date, interactions with the European and American congregations has been limited to discussing "issues of common concern," Kiet added.

Relations with Protestants improving

¶11. (SBU) Turning to relations with Vietnam's Protestant community, Kiet noted that since President Bush's participation in Vietnam's first-ever ecumenical prayer service on November 19, 2006 (organized by the Archdiocese and by the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North), relations between the two groups have continued to improve. The Archbishop hopes to establish more opportunities for ecumenical events like the prayer service and will also work to expand interfaith dialogue in general.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The Archbishop's comments track closely with what we have been hearing from Catholics across Vietnam. In spite of some continuing problems, 2006 was a good year for Vietnamese Catholics, and it would appear that the GVN made a high-level decision to improve conditions for Catholics as part of its larger efforts to improve religious freedom for its citizens. We will continue to engage the GVN to keep moving forward in this area. The run-up to

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President Triet's visit to the United States later this year will provide a good opportunity for raising the bar on Catholic issues. Septel will provide comment on the local reaction to Prime Minister Dung's recent meeting with the Pope. End Comment.

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